

Book Review

Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Parent (2011) by Meredith Small. New York: Anchor Books, 232 pages. ISBN: 978-0-385-48362-9 (pbk)

I hereby declare both shame and regret that I have ignored anthropology texts for the past four decades or so. It now seems inexcusable. Meredith Small, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Cornell, shames me by writing something exquisitely applicable to all I have been doing and thinking about babies and their families. I should have paid attention.

While her book is now 20 years old, its relevance to everyday practice is unmistakable. If your work is anything like mine—struggling to comprehend how families work, how babies grow, and how the two things intertwine—I bet you will find it just as relevant as I did.

If you could look at my copy of Dr. Small's book, you would find underlining (with a red pen, no less!) so abundant as to make the practice nearly useless. That is how much I did not want to forget the novel perspectives, and the countless heretofore-unknown factoids, jumping up at me from so many of the 232 pages.

She had me in the first chapter, "The Evolution of Babies," perhaps because separation, especially at birth, fascinated me from the very beginning of my own studies. My first writings, 45 years ago, were on the topic of differential separation in newborn twins, and I spent most of my career working with adoptive parents and the hurt, lost children they were expecting to be just like other kids. Focused as I was on the clinical and developmental issues, I gave scarcely a thought to the anthropology of it all: The fact that separateness—which we try so hard to normalize in Western obstetric and child welfare practice—is actually a radical and historically-recent departure from cultural norms on this planet.

In fact, the idea of babies being separated from their mothers after birth is shockingly new to human thought; it applies only to the last ninety years of our at least two-million-year history as a species, and only in Western culture. (p. 19)

No wonder it hurt kids so much.

So it should have rattled us far more than it did when Martin Cooney designed the incubator in 1896 and "...advocate[d] separation of infants from their mothers as a medical procedure for the health of the child" (p. 19). Our astonishing ignorance of the needs of babies (and of their mothers?!) is further demonstrated:

In a bizarre combination of medicine and sideshow, Cooney gathered hundreds of premature babies (they were easy to obtain because doctors assumed premature infants would die), put them into incubators, and exhibited them at various expositions and fairs in America and Europe. Babies were returned when they reached five pounds. But until then, their mothers were kept away. (Cooney would not allow mothers to visit with their infants, but did give them free passes to the exposition.) (pp. 19-20)

Herein must surely lie the point about why we should all have been reading anthropology. We have made thousands of such clinical and research errors in child welfare, obstetrics, and public policy over the last few hundred years, often because we had not looked at history and culture around the world. We had nothing against which to measure new ideas (like incubators, or infant formula, or English schools for natives in Alaska and Australia) because we lacked knowledge of our own norms and why they *were* norms.

Actually, *mothers* were almost always there, howling in protest at these many junctures in history when we so outrageously violated norms and ignored the needs of babies. *They* did not lack the necessary knowledge. Oh, how adept we were at ignoring women.

It was not Dr. Small's mission to criticize, as a thing-in-itself. She merely caused me to notice the bigger picture, to which I undoubtedly added my own outrage about the poverty and narrowness of much Western thought. Mostly, she teaches by reporting. She describes parenting practices around the world, in all sorts of cultures, and tries to make sense of the differences. The considerations are never cursory; sleep, breastfeeding practices, and frequency of holding are described in intricate detail in dozens of cultures. Few readers will come away, I am guessing, with a neutral perspective on our own Western practices. With no overt judgment, she merely describes the fact that Korean babies, at one month of age, spend 8.3% of their time alone, while same-age peers in America spend 67.5% of their time alone. Korean mothers virtually always respond immediately to infant cries, whereas American mothers typically ignore crying much of the time. While Americans tend to "...view child-parent co-sleeping as strange, psychologically pathological, and even sinful. Those in co-sleeping cultures see the Western practice of placing an infant alone as amoral and a form of child neglect or parental irresponsibility" (p. 118). She makes no direct connection with—and

certainly no judgement about—the fact that United States and Canada have the highest rate of SIDS (2 per 1000 live births) in the world, while the rate in Asian nations ranges from 0.3 to 0.03 per 1000 live births. We are left to make our own conclusions—or, at least, to wonder.

She forces us out of ourselves, by simply noting how others do things—and look at things—having to do with babies and family life. Suddenly our angst changes form; over infant sleeping, infant crying, nursing, daily caregiving, “spoiling,” daycare, work schedules, and a million other questions we ask poorly (without real curiosity, and even less information), and answer clumsily.

As consultants to families, besieged by child development and management questions, and often seduced into “playing the expert,” we are helped to step back, take the long view, challenge our assumptions (and those of parents), and come up with altogether radical, fun, expansive ways to join families in thinking about the many decisions that face them. After all, she teaches us,

Parenting is a veritable circus of interacting egos and needs, biological constraints and evolutionary expectations. As in all things in life, parenting too is a series of trade-offs; there is no perfect way, only a series of options, a bundle of possible pathways, that pilot adults through the hazardous job of bringing up babies.
(p. 228)

“Should we let him cry it out at night, or run to him every whipstitch?” becomes a different question entirely when we know that, throughout most of human history, babies have been sleeping *on* their parents, often in a sling, in the fields, everywhere, at work and at play. It doesn’t mean we have to do it this way in America; but the conversation changes a bit when we notice that we are constrained by culture if we are only thinking about the narrow question of responding to nighttime crying from a distant room.

But, a parent may argue, “Our baby cries to manipulate us!” Small would respond by undermining the negative connotation of “manipulate”:

The baby is biologically designed to manipulate adults to take care of it...Ignoring the baby’s cries might force the baby to finally fall asleep, but it will not, in the end, break the crying-feedback cycle which is so hard-wired into the infant...The biological function of crying is to signal... (p. 148)

In other words, we can ignore crying—condemning it as intrusive, manipulative, and exhausting—at our own peril, and at the peril of the child. This interruption of the normal pattern (established over many thousands of years) will force the child into new ways of meeting her own

needs. We may be pleased at this, in the short run—after all, we value independence in our children over almost everything, in America—but we may not be pleased with the results, in the long run. Children do not just stop having needs when they learn no one is listening to the signal. They just change how they meet those needs.

American parents might gape with disapproving astonishment to learn that most Japanese children sleep with their parents until they are teens; for them, the very concept of family includes sharing the night (p. 117). Again, this does not mean that co-sleeping is good, and the American way, with lengthy separations at night, is bad. It merely means that there is more to the question than appears to be the case. It means that separate sleeping, and unresponsiveness at night, goes against the norms of most cultures going back many thousands of years. We are welcome to do it differently. But Small encourages us to notice what we are doing, and to take note of context.

Indeed, for this reader, that is the soul of the book, and the reason it does not matter that it was published twenty years ago. She reminded me to be curious; to wonder about the larger, contextual issues raised in every child development and child-rearing question; to remember what babies are meaning to say in their behaviors, and in their responses to ours; to imagine the import of every choice on the baby's soul, his narrative, his future.

You may be interested in the author's earlier works on primate behavior, as well as a follow-up to the volume under review (*Kids: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Raise Young Children*), and one I am going to dive into next: *The Culture of Our Discontent: Beyond the Medical Model of Mental Illness*.

Reviewed by: Michael Trout, Director
The Infant-Parent Institute